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ABSTRACT

A 3-year study of decentralization of Alaska schools identified several factors that influenced whether a school was locally controlled and found patterns of control associated in important ways with staff and community attitudes toward school. Information was gathered by surveys and interviews conducted in 28 communities randomly selected to represent all rural Alaska schools. Analysis of patterns of control showed 24% of rural Alaska schools with regionalized control, 40% with localized control, and 36% with "mixed" control. Field studies suggested that the attitudes and values of district superintendents were a major factor in decentralization. Localization of control was also dependent on a stable local administrator with positive attitudes toward the community, stable local school boards that represented community interests, and district policy specifying areas of local authority in school governance. Measures of school climate and satisfaction with school showed significant differences among the three types of control. Administrators and teachers of regionalized schools were somewhat more proud of student academic achievement and learning than those of localized schools. Parents and community adults were particularly satisfied with Native culture and language programs at localized schools. Administrators and teachers at mixed control schools were significantly more likely to have negative expectations of students' ability and achievement than those in any other type of school. (JHZ)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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PATTERNS OF CONTROL IN RURAL ALASKA EDUCATION

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PATTERNS OF CONTROL IN RURAL ALASKA EDUCATION

Executive Summary

Overview

In 1975, Alaska's rural schools were under the centralized control of the State Operated School System (SOS) or the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). Decisions about who would teach in local schools, what would be taught and when--all were made by distant, urban-based administrators. Needs, interests, and concerns of rural parents and students, most of whom were Alaska Natives, were not regularly taken into account.

Ten years later in 1984, no rural Alaska school is centrally controlled. Instead, there are many opportunities for parents and students to influence local education--to select teachers, curricula, and school schedules. *In many parts of rural Alaska--in about four of every ten villages--schools are indeed locally controlled, by a city school district or by a local advisory school board working with a principal. However, in one-quarter of rural Alaska communities, local schools are controlled by a regional office and board. Finally, one third of rural schools are controlled by shifting regional, local, and other forces and pressures. No single pattern explains just who controls these schools and programs.*

Our three-year study of the organization of rural schooling discovered several factors that influenced whether a school was locally controlled--environmental influences, policies of the superintendent, and community attitudes and behavior. Whether a school is controlled by local, regional, or other forces is associated in important ways with the school's climate of instruction and educational outcomes. This brief report summarizes what we found.

Introduction

Rural Alaska has been sparsely populated since Western institutions became established in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and its small villages have been isolated from urban centers. For these reasons, as well as cost, the tendency on the part of governments was to develop centralized modes of service delivery. The largest service provider in rural areas, even after Alaska statehood in 1959, was the federal government, and its programs were directed from Washington, D.C. As the territorial administration developed, and then as state government expanded (and found revenue sources) to assume greater responsibility for rural areas, the centralized model of service delivery continued.

Centralization of services and government programs was part of a "cycle of dependency" in rural Alaska places. The means to counteract centralized control developed slowly and in response to national pressures and forces--the U.S. civil rights movement and the federal War on Poverty. A movement for Native self-determination began in the 1960s, as regional associations of Natives sought to settle land claims against the federal government. These groups federated on a statewide basis. With the discovery of oil and gas at Prudhoe Bay in 1968 (on land claimed by Natives), Congress supported resolution of the issue, in the Alaska Native Claims Settlement Act (ANCSA) of 1971. The act gave land and money to 12 new regional economic corporations and nearly 200 village corporations, in rural regions. ANCSA set the stage for further broad-based changes in rural society, including tensions and conflict between the state, its regions, and local communities.

Federal and state services for rural Alaskans, however, remained centralized after ANCSA, which frustrated goals for Native self-determination. Fortuitously, national attention was then focused on decentralization of government services and community control of schools (which historically has been a basic principle of U.S. education). Several U.S. cities were conducting experiments in the decentralization of municipal service bureaucracies, with the idea of bringing control "closer to the people."

Education was the most visible and popular service performed in rural areas. The problems in rural schooling--that rural students did not leave school with the same abilities in reading, writing, and computation as did their urban peers, and that education was not relevant to the cultural distinctiveness or social conditions of rural, Native places--became associated with centralization of education agencies, both the federal BIA school system and the Alaska SOS. Native leaders, educators, and others demanded that centralized educational systems be dismantled. A theme in their call for decentralized schooling was the improvement of rural schooling. National research on educational organization and change, although based on urban case studies, encouraged the belief that students and parents would become adapted to the schooling process, if it were subject to their control, and this would enhance achievement.

This campaign for control over education was the second phase of the Native self-determination movement in Alaska. In response to it, the Alaska state legislature decentralized the state-controlled rural school system in 1975. The Alaska SOS was converted into 21 Regional Educational Attendance Areas (REAAs), each with a regional policy board elected by local residents. At the same time, the federal government decentralized administratively the operation of BIA schools.

These state and federal policy choices were primarily a political response to rural and Native demands for local control.

Pattern of Control

Over a three-year period, we studied the way these changes were put into effect. The broad questions we asked were: What patterns of control emerged after decentralization of rural schools occurred in the mid-1970s? What factors and conditions were responsible for the development of these patterns? What attitudes and outcomes were associated with each pattern of control?

We found three patterns, based on who is in charge of most school operations:

1. "Regionalized" control--schools in which most activities are set by the district superintendent, in collaboration with office staffers and a regional school board. Twenty-four percent of rural Alaska schools are of this type.

Seventy-five percent of the regionalized schools are found in REAA districts, and most of the remainder are in borough school districts. In size, regionalized schools are about at the average for all rural schools. In ethnicity, regionalized schools are less likely to be Native majority than is the case of localized schools. There are no significant differences in the community income of regionalized, most localized, and mixed type schools.

2. "Localized" control--schools in which most operations are set by a principal or principal-teacher, in collaboration with a local educational committee or school board; or small city school districts (having between one and three schools at one geographical location) in which operations are controlled by both school and district office factors. Forty percent of rural Alaska schools fall into this category.

The smaller localized schools are more likely to be REAA or BIA schools than schools in city or borough school districts. Most of them have fewer than 50 students, and in this respect they are like regionalized and mixed schools. They are somewhat more likely to be Native majority schools, which is a consequence of the larger number of BIA schools included in the local type than in any of the others.

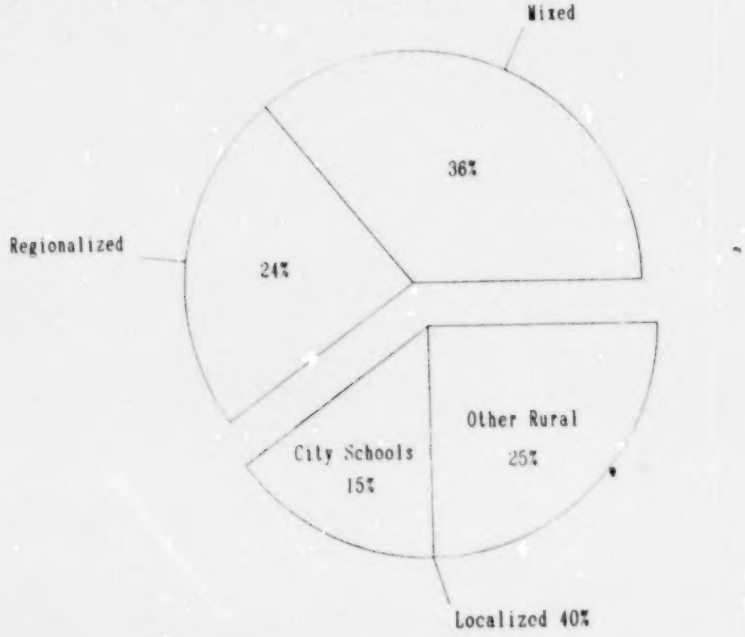
The larger localized schools are, as mentioned, within city school districts. They are the largest in enrollment and staffs of schools in rural Alaska. Three-fourths of them have over 100 students. They

most resemble urban schools in Alaska and in the contiguous-48 states. More of the larger localized schools have a mixed enrollment of Native and Caucasian students than a situation of Native or Caucasian majority. Finally, community income of this type of localized school is higher than is the case for other schools.

3. *"Mixed" control--schools that are mid-range between local and regional forms of control, those in whose operations most staff members are involved, or schools where no one seems to be in charge. Thirty-six percent of rural Alaska schools are of this kind.*

Three-quarters of the schools we have labeled mixed are in REAA districts and most of the remainder are borough schools--either outlying communities in areawide boroughs such as Kenai and the Matanuska-Susitna Borough, or in rural regional boroughs, such as the North Slope. Most of the schools are Native-majority, but there is a slightly larger number of mixed ethnicity schools in this type than in the smaller localized or regionalized groups of schools. There are no significant size or income differences between the mixed and other types.

Figure 1. Distribution of Control



Generally this distribution of control confirmed our expectations. We did not expect to find a large number of localized schools and did not.

The Significance of Control in Rural Education

In localized schools, advisory boards and administrators work together to develop school programs and determine school routines.

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Such schools are only two-fifths of the total number of rural schools in Alaska, but they are the ultimate goal of the decentralization movement. By definition the governance of regionalized and mixed control schools involves fewer local participants.

What is the significance of the differences in the distribution of control for rural Alaska education? *What are the advantages and disadvantages of schooling that is controlled locally? Staff members and programs are more responsive to community culture and values in localized schools. To teachers and administrators of localized schools, this makes the climate of conventional academic instruction problematical, and few believe that children will go on to college. But children attend localized schools regularly (absenteeism is very low), and appear adapted to them. Moreover, parents and community adults are more satisfied with localized schools than with those of the other types. Such satisfaction may reflect support for school programs--such as Native languages and cultures--that are qualitatively superior to those available previously or elsewhere, or satisfaction simply may reflect greater opportunities to participate in schooling--the satisfaction that comes from enhanced power. Whatever the ultimate source of satisfaction, it represents a major change in attitude of communities toward education.* Our research also discovered differences in attitudes of educational professionals and community residents concerning the role of schools (regarding academic vs. vocational preparation, for example) and this has negative implications.

Our field studies suggested that localization of control was dependent on several conditions, including:

- a stable local administrator who shares influence with the school board, has a positive orientation toward the local community, and a respect for community values;
- local boards or committees that represent major community interests, including factions;
- stability (low turnover) on the local board;
- a district superintendent who personally supports the ideology of local control;
- district policy specifying substantive, functional areas of school government in which local boards and administrators have deciding influence;
- district-level communication processes that are open.

(These conditions would appear to apply equally well to urban schools and to schools outside Alaska.) Localization of control is clearly dependent on regional as well as local factors. The attitude and values of district superintendents would appear to be singularly important in the decentralization process. Supportive values of superintendents may be traced to the degree of local influence in

selecting that individual in the first place. In other words, individuals may be hired precisely because they display tendencies that ultimately lead to district support for local goals--including going against the professional mainstream.

Slightly over one-third of the rural schools in Alaska have "mixed" forms of control, and these schools present interesting contrasts to localized and regionalized types. Noteworthy is the impact that a school's absorption of all available pressures and forces has on that school's operations and outcomes. In the sites we visited with such conditions, there was a far greater degree of teacher, administrator, and community dissatisfaction and this seemed to be associated with higher turnover rates at the school. Over time this would appear to have adverse impacts on student adaptation to the school and achievement.

Some schools of the mixed control type were at the fringe of their school district and in conflict with the headquarters, particularly regarding curricular materials used in school. Center/periphery relationships and conflicts are particularly troublesome in territorially large states, such as Alaska. (Several of the large REAAs are bigger than some states.) They affect other areas of government service delivery, too--for example, road service, health care delivery, and police and fire services. They also represent problems of professionalism, in that a major reason for centralized service administration is "professional necessity"--the need to control quality of service delivery through central office monitoring. This dimension concerns both amount and locus of control. Service agencies and programs at the headquarters are subject to a greater amount of monitoring than those at the periphery, and reciprocally they are likely to have greater influence over operations of the system as a whole. Thus, regional/local tension influences and is influenced by center/periphery conflict. However, we are likely to see this clearly only when decentralization policies are applied in geographically vast areas.

Finally, schools with a mixed pattern of control also showed competition between participants in school operations within and across communities, competition that did not result in conflict. This was due to the operation of a strategy of conflict avoidance on the part of administrators or a pattern of cooperation and competition. This would appear to be among the advantages of professional influence in rural school systems.

However, conflict and tension concerning control had an adverse impact on school climate, student adaptation and parent satisfaction.

State Policymaking and Organizational Change

The pattern of school control in rural Alaska is a direct result of legislative decisions made in the mid-1970s. The way decentralization was implemented by federal and state agencies had an obvious impact on the distribution of control that developed. Problems with the state legislation included:

- ambiguity regarding:

  the objectives of decentralization (which were multiple), the level to which decentralization was to occur (the role of community boards), and the primary responsible agent or body for implementing this vast organizational change;

- lack of time for the careful construction of what were entirely new school districts; and related to this,

- lack of participation by rural residents, including study of their views systematically, that would influence the design of the new system and the regulations developed to put it into effect.

Implementation problems of the state decentralization policy (and related small high school programs) included:

- lack of expertise in the state administration and within districts both to establish new school systems and to plan new schools and programs;

- lack of training of administrators and teachers, most of whom were carried over from the centralized system;

- legislative inattention: the legislature failed to exercise its role as the assembly of the unorganized borough and monitor school district and school operations;

- insufficient training and preparation, at the community level, regarding powers and responsibilities of local boards;

- lack of an evaluation procedure, or any means of determining whether districts and schools were performing adequately;

- lack of state support in development of curriculum materials, facilities design and construction to assist new school districts in rural Alaska.

Despite these problems, within a short period of time, *substantial decisionmaking authority was transferred downward to rural Alaska communities.*

School Governance

To understand rural school organization, we asked educators: Who takes part in local school operations? Who has the greatest amount of influence? During our research we administered surveys and visited 28 communities, selected randomly to represent all rural schools. We talked to hundreds of teachers, administrators and board members, who told us how their schools were governed. In the discussion below, we present profiles describing general conditions in each type.

Regionalized Schools. Regionalized schools adhere to policy set by the district office. Staffing of schools, including selection of principal, teachers, and in some cases even support staff, does not involve systematic local input. District-wide curricula exist in most of the schools, and there is opposition to this from some community members. However, it does not appear to be the case that school programs and classroom instruction are directed by the district office in a lock-step fashion. The system is too loose for this to occur, and teachers have much autonomy. The local school budget is centrally determined, as are school construction matters. Limited involvement in school governance processes seems to describe the situation of principals, teachers, and community members in these school sites. They perceive that opportunities for participation are artificial, such as serving on advisory committees that lack influence.

Localized Schools. The policy of district headquarters has an impact on localized schools too, but there is evidence of substantially greater local participation in critical school routines. Advisory boards and principals may interview candidates for teaching positions, and they are important forces in the evaluation of school personnel. Local advisory boards and administrators are autonomous in their selection of school support staff. Curricular policy is subject to school site influences, and there tends to be great variation in the types of programs available in localized schools. Some emphasize Native culture and language courses, but there are also standard academic programs in many of these schools. A recent trend observed is lessened concern for bilingual education programs, especially in Native majority schools. Most localized schools have a collection of course topics or emphasis areas in local arts, crafts, and economic activity. Each of the localized schools has an amount of discretionary revenue that the advisory board and administrator can use without district office supervision. In adapting school calendars, designing new additions or school buildings, and determining community use of the school, local advisory boards and administrators are most influential.

In rural city school systems, there is greater likelihood of professional control. Higher-level staff are subject to board influence, but principals and teachers are hired by superintendents. The curriculum is influenced by teachers, as is the school calendar. The greater degree of teachers' influence is related to the number of teachers in the schools and their longer tenure. School programs are less likely to reflect the area's unique history, culture, and economy than is the case of localized schools in the REAA or BIA systems.

Mixed Schools. Finally, the governance of mixed schools shows sporadic influence of district and local forces over most phases of school operations. No single participant--superintendent, district or local board, principal or teacher--has the greatest degree of influence. Instead who has power to decide tends to be unclear, as seen in cases of ambiguity and occasional conflict among boards, district and local staffs over such issues as adopting new programs and designing school facilities.

Social and Political Conditions

The extent to which a school is locally (or regionally) controlled usually relates to the strength of organizations in the environment, district administration practices, and local board capability.

Environmental Influences. Each of the districts with regionalized schools had social and political organizations such as regional ANCSA corporations that might have influenced district operations and those of local schools. In all sample sites but one, however, there were relatively few regional and local pressures and the district office was insulated from them. Few regional social and political pressures penetrated into schools of these districts directly.

There was considerable sociopolitical variation across the schools that were localized. In these school communities, local social and political groups were represented on the board, and they influenced strongly the direction of schooling. Hiring of personnel and direction of the school curriculum--for example, teaching of Native culture and language courses, and emphasis on basic academic instruction--were susceptible to board control. Pressure from community organizations was found in all localized communities, but it was most disruptive of school operations in small communities.

Some of the schools with "mixed" control had been captured by powerful regional or local economic (and in some cases, political) groups. School hiring and curriculum were directly influenced. This environmental pressure tended to circumvent the school board and administration.

Administrative Conditions. Superintendents of regionalized schools are the pivot of the system; they have highly personalistic styles of administration. They are likely to use a chain of command system, one unique factor of which is an area principalship in district offices. This imposes an intermediate level between school principals (or principal-teachers) and the district superintendent. Relationships of superintendents with members of the district staff--principals, principal-teachers, and some teachers--tend to be dyadic or one-on-one ties, and the set of these relationships composes a district clientage network. Such a system is very territorial, but administrative coupling is quite loose. Individual classrooms in this system are no more tightly linked to the district office than they are in localized sites, because there are no consistent regulations in the system. We found stability in district offices and high turnover in the local schools, which was related to personalism and/or uncertainty in the relationships between local administrators, teachers, and the district office. Teachers objected strongly to this system in most of the field sites, and complained that they did not know what district policy was. However, teachers felt they were in charge of the classroom and supported by the local community.

Localized schools, on the other hand, tend to be in school districts where the superintendent believes strongly in local control and district policy supports it. The administrative system is loosely

coupled between schools and the district office and staff, and tightly coupled at the local level. Turnover of district superintendents and school board members is high. At the local level, however, turnover of principals and principal-teachers is relatively low (compared to turnover rates in regionalized and mixed schools). Teachers of localized schools have greater opportunity for participation in administrative processes and made fewer complaints about the district office. A large subset of localized schools--the rural city school districts--are most strongly influenced by superintendents, but the turnover of superintendents has been very high. Teachers, more numerous in the larger schools of this type, are organized collectively, and they tend to be the most stable force within the schools. This sub-type best represents the classic model of professional control of schooling.

Those schools with "mixed" control have no unique administrative system. There is stability in neither district office nor school site, and this is the subject of many complaints by teachers. Most administrative problems, however, concern spatial issues--the fact that schools of mixed control are more likely to lie at the periphery of the school district and have logistic problems not present in other schools.

Local Board Capability. Regionalized schools lacked a local counterpoint to the power of district school board, district office, and superintendent. In several districts, community school committees in villages were eliminated when that became possible in 1979. Powers of the remaining committees--now usually called Parent Advisory Committees (PACs) or Local School Advisory Committees (LSACs)--were carefully circumscribed. Local advisory committees were weak or inactive in most of these school sites, and communities were apathetic and disinterested concerning the schools. Factors responsible included: lack of preparation for work on local educational committees, lack of power of the committees, and lack of social integration in the communities. Conflict in regionalized schools took place outside institutional settings, and its effects were very disruptive.

Boards and advisory committees of localized schools, on the other hand, were strong, stable, and well-connected to the centers of influence in the community. All field sites had Advisory School Boards (ASBs) that were defacto policy boards. Participation in board meetings and educational affairs appeared to be somewhat greater than in regionalized schools, but this depended on issues to an extent. Principals or principal teachers in localized school communities were definitely more prominent and appeared to be involved in a double process of interpretation. They understood community goals and expectations, and then interpreted the world of instructional norms and practices and the school programs in terms of community expectations. Secondly, they defended this result to district office personnel, including the superintendent and the regional board, to protect the autonomy of their community schools. Community residents appeared to believe that the principal could influence the district staff and superintendent, which motivated them to express their desires to the principal. Thus, the local administrator had an

understanding of community expectations based on productive relations with the community. In most cases, localization of control is the product of community boards and principals. The principal's style of school management is open and supportive of local cultural values, which leads to acceptance and trust by the community.

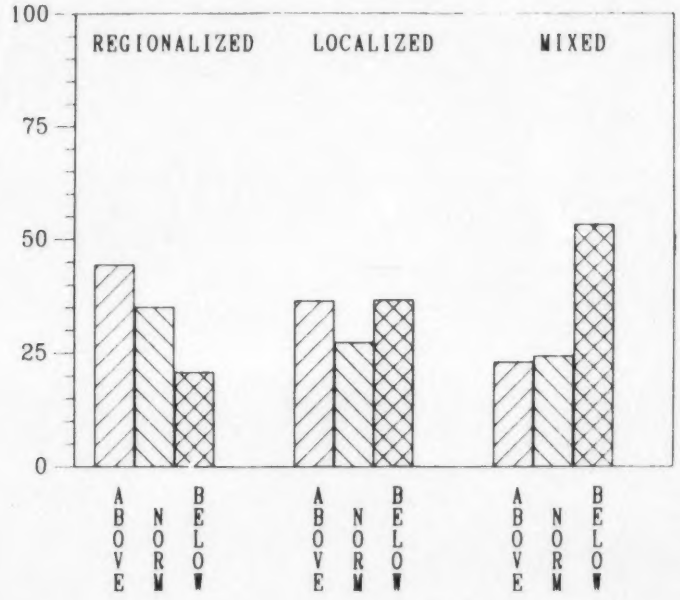
Strength of school boards is related to community size, as seen in the subgroup of rural city school districts: their boards tended to be relatively weak (in comparison to educational professionals), and they failed to represent important groups in the communities, particularly Natives when they were a minority. The most volatile school-community relations were those of the mixed schools. Boards tended to be weak or divided, and conflict between boards and principals was frequent.

School Climate and Outcomes

Most of the measures we used to assess school attitudes and outcomes were not rigorous. Yet there was agreement among data collected with different measures, which gives us some confidence in them. They showed significant differences between different types of control of schools.

Administrators and teachers of regionalized schools were somewhat prouder of student academic achievement and learning than those of localized schools (see Figure 2). They had positive attitudes regarding the climate of teaching and learning in their schools and thought their school's reputation was high--to a greater extent than did administrators in other types of school (with the exception of administrators of rural city schools in a few areas). We controlled for the effects of ethnicity, school size, community income, and other factors on these relationships. Ethnicity and school size explained some differences: administrators of Caucasian majority, and large schools tended to have more positive attitudes than administrators of Native majority and small schools. But the control variables ethnicity and school size did not erase the independent effect of control type.

Figure 2. Administrators' Perceptions of Students' School Achievement and Learning



Behavior problems at regionalized schools were few, and rates of dropouts and vandalism were slightly lower than in other types of rural schools (which already have lower rates than urban schools). Parents and community members thought the quality of teaching math and reading in these schools was good and were generally positive in their evaluation of teachers' work, but they were dissatisfied with education specific to the community. The chief area of dissatisfaction was Native culture and language programs, which were less likely to be a formal part of the school program.

The climate of expectations in localized schools, as reported by administrators and teachers, is less positive regarding college attendance and school achievement than in regionalized schools. Few seniors go on to college. Two-fifths of the teachers thought student ability was below the national norm (see Figure 3). (There are slightly more small, Native majority schools in this type than in the others.) Students seemed adapted to these schools, though, and the absenteeism rates are the lowest of any type of rural school, which reflects on the positive atmosphere of the school in the community. Student behavior problems are also few at localized schools. Parents had more positive attitudes concerning principals and teachers than is the norm. They have lower opinions of regional (but not local) school boards. Parents and community adults were particularly satisfied with Native culture and language programs at the localized schools. *What surprised us was that they were also much more likely to think the "academic program is good" than were residents of other school communities. Our field research did not find evidence that localized school programs were intrinsically better, and perhaps this*

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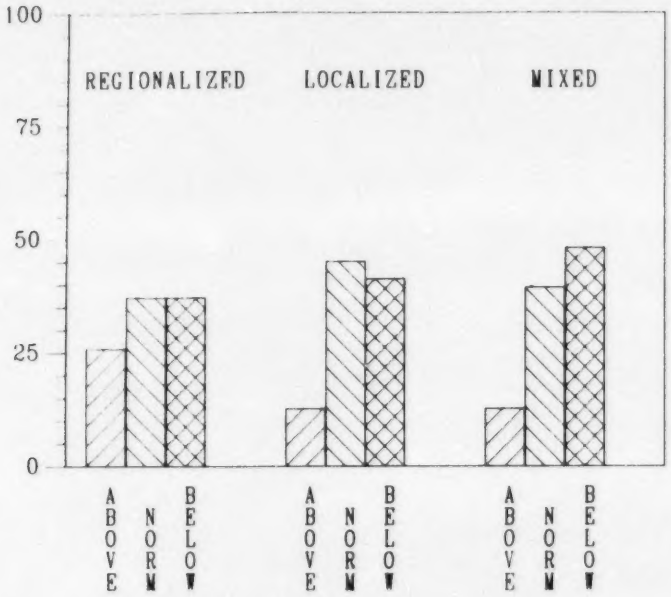
perception of parents is attributable to their greater involvement and participation in school operations. (Parents in most remote villages lacked knowledge about school operations and perspective, regardless of type of school.)

Figure 3. Teachers' Perceptions of Students' Academic Ability



Administrators of rural city school systems are the most positive regarding the likelihood of college attendance by school youth; they also tend to evaluate the school's achievement and learning environment highly. Significantly, teachers in rural city schools are of the opposite opinion. Staff members are far more likely to emphasize college preparation as an important role and less likely to emphasize training in local culture. But, these differences are largely the consequence of ethnicity (schools in rural city districts are more likely to have Caucasian than Native majorities). Absenteeism, drop-out and vandalism rates are higher in these schools than in any other type. This subtype also stands out from all other schools studied in the relatively high level of instances of behavior problems--alcohol and drug problems, use of abusive language, and in one of the field sites we visited, a physical attack on a teacher. These behavior differences, however, are largely a product of the size of the schools and their essentially urban character than of the type of control. Community residents are generally dissatisfied with school programs (except for math), and they are strongly dissatisfied with teacher performance and integration in the community. Rural city attitudes in general are not strongly supportive of education.

Administrators and teachers of schools having mixed control situations are significantly more likely to have negative expectations of student ability and achievement than in any other type (see

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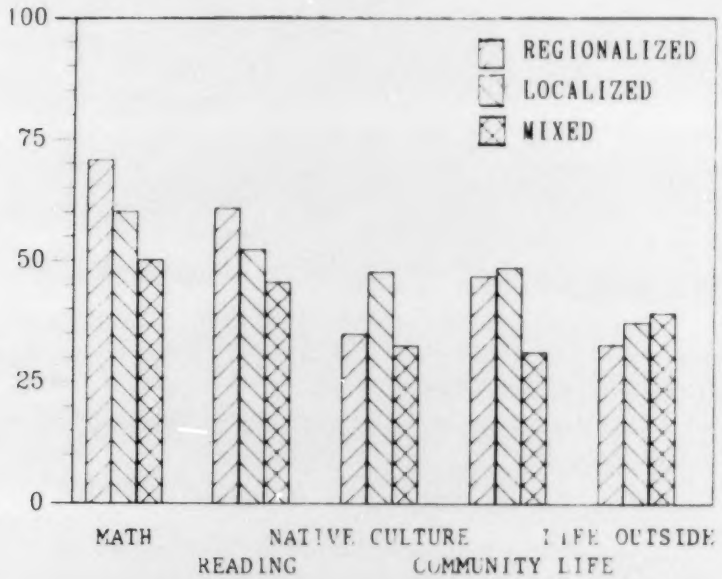
Figures 2, 3). However, their negative views are not reciprocated by parents and other community adults. In general, community residents are not greatly dissatisfied with school programs (except those in Native language and culture) and they tend to have flattering opinions about both boards and administrators (see Figure 4).

Figure 4. Community Residents' Perception of Education as "Good"



We have summarized the different ways in which rural schools are organized, following decentralization of education in 1976. In each of the types there is a different relationship between the environment of the school community and the school itself. Local school operations vary across the three types. Finally, adaptation to the school and satisfaction with it vary. Our measures of satisfaction were not rigorous (we surveyed a non-random sample of adults), but in combination with interviews of parents and board members they suggest that the standing of school programs is associated with the type of control over schools. Ongoing studies will show the impact that decentralization of education in rural Alaska has had over time, and the extent to which it has significantly enlarged citizen influence.

Copies of the final technical report are available from the Center for Cross-Cultural Studies and the Department of Political Science, University of Alaska, Fairbanks.

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